

A Stranger's Story

by NineNails

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Summary: War hero, celebrated architect, genius inventor. If any Ceal were to survive the Calamity, of Couse it would have been Rucks. But how did one of Cealondia's favored sons end as a simple old stranger, waiting on a floating island, for a young man to save him?

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****Intro****

Rucks Narration: _

I remember manny things from back in the day. Not too many from before the war though, I was just a kid back then. Nothing like the Kid mind you. I couldn't pull that kind of muscle if my life depended on it, witch oddly enough, it often did. Nah, I was a dreamer. My Momma would hum me a tune and I'd drift off and dream of all manner of contraption. I'd dream of floating cities and ships. I'd dream of reaching the stars and touching the moon. And then I'd wake up and and draw what I saw in my sleep. I think I always knew I was supposed to be a Mancer, to make things that were only to be found in Caelondia. But life has this bad habit of taking us on the odd detour or two.

My Daddy was a Trigger, one of the finest marksmen our people ever had. He and his buddies tamed the vary land our homes were built on. His old bolt action rifle was so loud, it sounded like one of Pyth's hoofs coming down and he never missed. So naturally, when the day of the Ura revolt came, he picked it back up and made for Point Lemaigh. I never saw my Daddy again. What we thought to be just some rebels causing a bit of commotion along the border, turned out to be a full-fledged military front of all unified Ura clans. And so with the shots of a few rifles, a 'small' land dispute turned in to a war and neither sides were pulling any punches. They'd trad their bows in for

repeaters and we'd build our walls higher. They'd start throwing grenades and planting land mines and we'd build an armada of floating gunboats. They'd train beasts and monsters to strike at the heart of Caelondia and we'd end the war in the most horrifying way we could imagine. And as you know, we Cael have all kinds of imagination.

But I'm getting a head of myself. I should start at the beginning, like all proper stories doâ€¦|

Rucks (Head Mancer on Project "Bastion")

****Chapter 1: Knuckle Up****

Cinderbrick Fort.****

"Did you hear me boy?!" A tall Cael in a straw kicker hat bellowed furiously down at a recruit.

"I-I did Sarge. Sir!" the tiny recruit answered with a startled shriek.

"Then what in Pyth's name was that?"

"I-I-I ain't ever held a gun before. Sir!" The boy squeaked out in an almost girlish tone.

"You seriously tellin' me you're Pops aint' ever thought you how to shoot?" If possible the Sargent's dark skin turned red.

"I ain't ever known my Pops. Sir!" The recruit closed his eyes and backed his face as far away from the Sargent as he could without leaving his position. The Sargent took this as an invitation to move even closer to make sure his message was getting across, or to try to poke the recruit's eye out with his sharply waxed, and almost cartoonishly overgrown, white mustache.

"The Pantheon be damned boy! You're holdin' a scrap musket, not a duelin' pistol! You ain't got to be as sharp as a pike to hit somethin'!" The Sargent raised his voice to emphasize the last sentence and the extent of the boy's incompetence. Then he snatched the musket out of the boy's hand, loaded a cartridge and fired it, all in a single smooth motion. With one shot he eviscerated several Zolwood gourds. All of the other recruits flinched at the blast's sound, except one. One recruit, in a slightly oversized helmet, at the far end of the firing range perked up to get a better whiff of the strong sweet smell of shredded gourd.

The Drill Sargent, having had many years' practice in noticing and singling out whatever he would describe as 'unruly behavior', naturally recognized the lack of fear in the in this particular recruit. _'Nerves of steel eh? Lucky for you, I got myself a pair of pliers.'_ The Sargent chucked the heavy, still smoking fire arm in to the tiny recruit's arms, leaving him flustered and and mumbling something like "Th-Thanks sirâ€¦|" He made a B-line straight for the strangely calm recruit, never taking his eyes off the Kid, like an ankle-gator, having picked up the sent of blood. "Now aint' you somethin' special." The Sargent slowed down to a mosey, letting the spur on each boot heel make their signature *klinking* sound with

every step. "As a youngen' I did not have the stomach for Zolwood gourds. Hell, I still ain't able to keep em down." Like with the small recruit he had just finished intimidating, the Sargent stood tall, boots anchored to the ground, hips cocked and starred his new target down. "Nerves of steel and a gut made of led. I bet you don't feel pain and fart lightnin' to top it all off." Some of the recruits couldn't help but snigger at the Sargent's last remark. But after a short and mean glare from his already annoyed eyes, any sound that wasn't the Sergeants voice vanished. "You deff boy?" He directed his attention back to the recruit in the slightly oversized helmet.

"No, sir." The recruit answered plainly, his nose angled upward as if he could still smell the scent of gourd.

"So you just gonna take all my insults like some cowardly, green bellied squirt?" the Sargent spoke slower, taking his time to inspect the young Cael in front of him. The Kid was tall for his age and had started growing some facial hair, short tufts of white bristle along his upper lip and chin. His standard indigo and red uniform fit him just fine and all in all he seemed to carry himself well. Just his helmet was a touch too big for him, which led to the questions; was the fort running low on equipment already? Or did this kid simply have a head one size too small for his body?

Just as the Sargent's nostrils flared up, the heavy intake of air to fuel his next anger driven chain of insults, the Kid spoke up: "I like your badge, Sir. The one on your hat."

His statement was so simple, so very unrelated to the 'topic', and was spoken so earnestly, the Sargent was unsure how to respond. Was the Kid insulting him somehow? Was the Kid just trying to weasel his way out of getting chewed out? The Sargent did his best to hide his loss in composure, but he knew he couldn't let the awkward silence drag out. And just as he was about to bellow out something about the Kid's head being tiny, that's when an idea struck him. "This badge, right here Kid?" He said, taking his straw hat off and pointing to the gold rimmed Ca crest that adorned it.

The recruit in the oversized helmet nodded. "Yup. That's a Marshall's badge aint' it? I heard the blue stone in the middle is a piece of Core."

"Now aint' you all knowledgeable." The sergeant changed this posture. Suddenly he was no longer the hard ass, hell bent on chewing every single one of his cadets out. He bent over and spoke softly as if he were explaining something to his young nephew "You got me their kid. I ain't been a Marshall in a long while. This badge ain't got no more authority, but I still ware the old thing. Good times and the like." The Sargent shot the kid a tense look. "And it's yours for the low, low price of takein' it from me."

"Beg pardon, Sir?" The kid lifted his helmet over his forehead to revile his dumfounded expression.

"You heard me right boy. That helmet aint' doin' you no favors." He tapped on the kid's helmet with his knuckles. "And though you hit every one of your targets, you ain't got much in the ways of muscle." He then took three steps away, putting his hat back on his head and roiling the sleeves of his red checkered shirt back. "So instead of pointless target practice, you're gonna fight me every day for this

here hat."

"I aint' sure I'm ready to take a swing at my Drill Sargent. Sir." The kid took a hesitant step back.

"Trust me kid, all ya'll are gonna wanna take a swing at me before too long." The Sargent took a look over to all of his recruits and grind a crooked grin. "And just to motivate ya, if ya fail to beat me today; ya gonna be runnin' ten laps around the fort before supper time. And for every subsequent day ya fail; another fellow recruit will be joinin' ya." The Kid's face slowly sagged as the consequences of the Drill Sargent's command dawn on him. He found almost every one of his comrades in arms shooting him angry or concerned looks. He hesitantly got in to a fighting stance, or at least what he thought resembled one, and slowly edged closer to his opponent. The Sargent gave the kid a sympathetic look and shortly after a quick jab to the cheek, sending him sprawling. "Aww, now that's just down right disappointin' Kid. I can see, plain as day ya skinnier than a new born pecker but you could have had some girt to ya."

The Kid slowly picked himself back up and dusted his uniform of, adjusting his red scarf and taking a quick look around for where his helmet landed. He would have rubbed his cheek to, if it didn't sting so badly. "I ain't much for fist fightin' Sir." The Kid had an apologetic half smile on his face as he rubbed the sand out of his white hair.

The Kid had guts, taking a hit then getting up and smiling the way he did. _'That has got to be the most un-soldierly thing I have ever seen.'_ The Drill Sargent thought to himself, but instead spoke: "You sure you wanna be a fightin' man?"

"Nope." The Kid answered plainly. "None of ya recruits wanna be a fighter, in case ya haven't noticed." "Sir." He added quickly after, hopping not to have insulted his superior. "We're all drafted. Bottom-of-the-barrel, Sir." He noticed the Sargent holding his helmet and reached out to take it.

The Sargent pulled the helmet back out of his reach. "You ain't gettin nothin to hide that white head of yours from the sun, except this here hat." He took a better look at the Kid's face, realizing he was a tad bit scruffier than the other boys. Tiny scars around his forehead and cheeks, his now gloveless hands were visibly bandaged around the knuckles and calluses covered his fingers. The Sargent couldn't help but ask himself: _'Now why would he be holdin back?'_ "Enough bellyachin now, Kid. Ya got some runnin to get done." And with that the Kid simply nodded and made for the fort gates.

Hours later the Kid came back though the same gates, moor limping then walking, coated in sweat, sand and sludge from a scumbag he literally rains in to. _'Damn, missed supperâ€¦'_ He realized, standing in front of the dark canteen tent that the Marshals had set up for their trainees.

"At least you can shoot worth a damn." He turned to see one of his comrades from their unit. It was the tiny blond one who couldn't hit a single target all day. "I snagged somethin' for ya." He reached in to his leather satchel and pulled out a loaf of bread. The Kid didn't mean to be untrusting, yet he still couldn't help but hesitate. "I wanted to say thanks for takein' the heat of a me."

"I didn't mean to, but the bread is much appreciated anyways." He immediately took a large almost ravenous bite out of the loaf and sat down in front of the tent, as if he had lost interest in anything and everything else.

"I got some vine-apples too, and I'll be happy to share theesâ€|" the short recruit reached in to the leather satchel again and pulled out a jar filled with what seemed to be orange flakes.

"Spices?" The kid asked, bits of bread escaping his mouth.

"My granddaddy's a spicer. He ships these things all across the Boundless Sea." The blond boy stared intently at the orange flakes. "Name's Rondy, by the way." He stretched out his hand for a shake.

The kid took a hard, dry gulp of bread and coughed some of it up. Then reached in to his back pocket for a flask and took a long swig from it, before putting it in Rondy's hand "Ain't nothin' special, just some Whale Ale." Rondy was slightly taken back and uncertain if his friendliness was being reciprocated. "Rucksâ€|" the Kid whispered under his breath. "My name's Rucks."

__**Zolwood Grove, Two Weeks Later.**__

Rucks keeled over, breathing heavily. The last punch to the gut was so tough, he almost lost his lunch, but he held on to it with every muscle in his body. The run he would be forced to go on after would have been all the harder if he hadn't. "It's been a week Kid." The Sargent lifted his straw kicker hat from his sweat soaked head and wiped his brow. "One whole week of ass woppins and you aint' been able to land a single blow. And here I thought takein' ya'll out in to the rough and tumble was gonna toughen you up. Looks like I forced the whole squad to pack up and hike all the way out here for nothin'."

Rucks finally recovered and forced himself back up to his full height. "I think the change in scenery's done us a world of good, Sir." He turned to look to his fellow recruits, still struggling to master their muskets. "Besides, the fort was getting kinda crazy." Rucks was right. Cinderbrick Fort had become the launching point for Caelondias largest offensive campaign so far. And that meant a great number of additional troops moving in on what was already the Marshall's headquarters and the training grounds for new soldiers. Needless to say, it was getting very crowded. Rucks also noticed the Sargent's ease in posture and tone of voice since leaving the fort, implying a somewhat selfish reason for moving the troop out in to the open. But Rucks knew better than to mention something like that out loud.

"Go on now, Kid. If ya want to be back in time for supper ya best get runnin' soon." The Drill Sargent commanded, noticeably lacking any kind of insult or sarcasm. He learned, after multiple attempts, that Rucks was not one to be intimidated by words, no matter what they meant or how harshly spoken. He would simply nod, or smile, or retort with something so out of the blue and unrelated, the Drill Sargent would have problems coming up with a retort. The Sargent had entertained the idea that the 'Kid', as he had always referred to Rucks as, might have been some kind of simpleton. It stood to reason,

he was after all drafted in to service. And the Sargent knew better than most that the young men drafted in to Caelondias military were rarely ideal soldiers. But the Kid was different, the Kid had, as some Caelondians like to say, 'sand'. '_Kid knows how to hold his own. No white haired Cael ever had a n easy childhood. So why ain't he fightin'?'_

Rucks ran across the encampment from the hill, where he and the Sargent were now having their daily and rather one sided fist fights. He ran passed the tent, where he and his fellow recruits took their meals, and slowed down to wave over at Rondy, who had proven a special talent for smuggling unproved 'supplies' and become the squad's unofficial cook. Rucks ran between the two entwined and overgrown zolwood trees, that marked the beginning of their encampment, and down the dim narrow path that led along the grove and stretched up the hills to the west close enough from which to see the Cinderbrick Fort, all the while watching every step taken to make sure not to trip and fall. He had done so the day before and landed on the corse and spiky skin of a gourd. He rubbed at his shoulder at the thought of how much the initial impact hurt, only to flinch at how much touching it made it smart.

"Sarge messed yo up bad today?" Rucks spun around mid-jog to see Bynn, the shortest recruit in their squad, next to Rondy that is. He was tanned, dark even for a Cael, if it weren't for his slightly darker hair as contrast, Bynn's complexion would be almost too dark to make out his features.

'_Course Sarge sent you, old pecker-hole's got to make everything all competitive.'_ Rucks thought to himself, grinding his teeth slightly at the thought of running at a brisker pace. Bynn was by far the fastest runner in the squad. For a kid who was barely as tall as Rucks's shoulder, he moved twice as fast and agile than a hungry bush-panther. "Nah. Sarge ain't ever hurt me more than I can handle. This right here though," And he pointed to his shoulder, as if Bynn could see through his shirt, "that came with regards form the fruits of the wildness."

Bynn narrowed his eyes. "Can't you just say ya fell on a gourd?" he asked slowly picking up his pace as if to spite his comrade's efforts. Rucks had only begun speaking to Bynn few days ago, shortly before they left the fort. The days before that they would run in silence, or rather Bynn would run and Rucks would attempt to keep up. Rucks did his best not to show it, but had a hell of a competitive streak and he was going to let tiny old Bynn continue beating him on a daily basis. And the fact that he was getting a head start wasn't making him feel any better. "You might wanna get runnin." Bynn shot over his shoulder, while steadily passing Rucks "I don't mind the daily exertion, but them other boys, they ain't too enthused." Most of Rucks's fellow recruits understood his position and were glad that the Sarge was directing a great deal of his attention elsewhere. But as Bynn had just mentioned, there were those who took Rucks's daily failure somewhat personally. Seeing how Rucks wasn't warming up to the thought of running in to those particular comrades, he picked up his pace and stayed on Bynn's heels as best as he could.

Rucks made it back to the camp shortly after sunset. He found Bynn and Rondy at the bace of one of the trees that marked the camps entrance. "What took you so long?" Bynn mocked, having caught his breath. Rucks, lacking any and all energy to engage, settled with

shooting him a dirty look.

"Leave em be and besides, chow's ready, best get a move on if we want to eat." Rondy insisted. Booth Rucks and Bynn didn't need to be reminded of how quickly a warm meal, no matter how plentiful, disappeared amongst a herd of hungry young soldiers. The two of them practically raced one another to the mess tent, leaving poor, little Rondy behind to play catch-up.

After inhaling two boles of steaming, reddish-brown slop and a stale bun that had a slight copper taste to it, most of the troop were sluggish and ready to pass out. "Thanks a bunch Rondy. That wasn't half as bad as I was expectin'." Bynn complemented before burping loudly.

"Thanks?" Rodney answered while beginning to doubt if his new friends were capable of sincerity. "We should enjoy it as long as we can, Got a letter from Ma yesterday, she says it's gonna be hard to get some of the goods for our general-store."

"Why's that? War aint' reached the coast yet." Rucks asked, suddenly interested in the conversation.

"Turns out some merchant mogul type's been buyin' up all kinds a food supplies. Hoarding it in case of a siege." Rodney answered, while leaning in closely.

"Pff- So much for suportin' the war effort." Bynn groaned. For a guy that, at least seemed, to be the happy-go-lucky type, Bynn could be one hell of a cynic. But Rucks couldn't help but agree with him. The war hadn't even reached Caelondia yet, and the folks were starting to turn on one another.

Rucks was self-aware enough to understand the unpleasant nature of his people. That their martial culture had made it hard for the Cael as a people to 'make friends'. And that their idea of landownership was the reason they were, once again, at war. Rucks stood and made his way to the bench where the food was served. His daily runs were getting rougher and he needed a bit mor food to keep him going. Besides, Rodney did say to enjoy while they could. But before Rucks could reach for an apple, a figure stood in his way, cutting him off.

"I think you've had your fare share." A dark haired and almost pale Cael sated, as menacingly as one can when trying to intimidate someone taller.

"Not in the mood today, Shane." Rucks mumbled, trying to bypass his fellow recruit. Shane wasn't as tall as rucks, but he was broad and easily the the most muscular amongst the recruits. Physically he was the strongest recruit in their company, able to clear the obstacle corse in record time and was always ahed of the troop during long hikes. Being surrounded by scrawny and short boys only made his obvious attributes seem all the moor superior. Leading the Sargent to make him squad leader by default. But sadly, Shane acquainted leadership with bullying.

Shane held out his arm, pushing Rucks back in front of him. "Where you think your goin' boy?" He asked mockingly. "Me and some of the boys are startin' to get worried about you."

"There aint' no need to be." Rucks mumbled again, trying to bypass Shane once more.

Shane repeated his movement again, holding Rucks back and keeping him from the bowl of apples. "We all march together, train together and exercise together, so pray tell what makes you so special? What makes you think we want to do moor runnin' at the end of a long day?"

"It aint' my idea, Shane. Gettin' my but kicked and havin' to run till supper aint' what I'd call a good time either." Rucks answered, looking Shane in the eyes, hoping to find some sign of understanding. Sadly, he found only anger, the kind of anger an absent or overzealous parent inspires, the kind of anger Rucks himself was all too familiar with.

Rucks attempted to pas Shane once moor but instead of simply pushing him back, Shane decided to slap Rucks to the side of his head. The shock forced him to stumble back and subconsciously clench his fists. Rucks then looked back at Shane. His white hair, usually neatly combed back, now covering his face close to where he was struck. It was then that they realized that everyone in the mess tent went silent, eagerly waiting for rucks to retaliate. But he didn't. Instead he turned around and walked away, and that would have been that, if Shane hadn't taunted him: "Guises it's true what they say about you 'Haints' aint' it?"

Rucks had lost his temper only three times in his life. First time was as a boy, when his pet jackalope and only friend was maimed by the neighborhood bully. And the second was the moment Shane referred to him as a 'Haint'.

Without a thought in his head, Rucks spun on his heel and placed his fist squarely in Shane's face and leaned in as he felt the satisfying crunch of his knuckle braking Shane's nose. Shane stumbled back, catching himself on the table and knocking over the bowl of green apples that were indirectly to blame for his current predicament. He struggled to keep his balance, dizzy from the hit to the face and reeling, one hand on his nose doing little to keep the blood in and the other waving about gripping at anything that would help him. But as soon as Shane found his footing, Rucks kicked him in the stomach sending him tumbling again. This time bouncing of the big tent flap and rolling back to Rucks feet. Right then and there, Rucks would have kicked him again and again and again, much like had once done to his neighborhood bully.

But before Rucks could draw his leg back, a firm callouts hand gripped his shoulder. "That e'll do kid, Save some for the front."

End
file.